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Sarah J. Zuckerman

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, szuckerman2@unl.edu

Jennifer McAtee

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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YOUTH VOICE IN A RURAL CRADLE-TO-CAREER NETWORK*Sarah J. Zuckerman**Jennifer R. McAtee*

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Abstract

Outmigration, economic restructuring, and other challenges require rural communities to adapt. Area-based initiatives, such as cradle-to-career networks, have been seen as a means for increasing community resiliency through the simultaneous creation of social capital and civic and economic redevelopment. Community resiliency is often seen as a single-generation issue; however, developing youth's voices provides simultaneous positive youth development and community civic development that can support community resiliency. This qualitative case study examines how youth voice opportunities were used in a rural cradle-to-career network to build towards future research on the role of youth voice in area-based initiatives and community resiliency.

Introduction

Multi-sector area-based initiatives have been touted as factors in the economic revitalization of rural communities (Schafft, 2016; Shortall, 2004). These initiatives rely on human and social capital for community development. While rural schools play key roles in engaging youth and communities (Lyson, 2002; Tieken, 2014), overall there are few opportunities for young people to participate in the public realm and to gain necessary experience in civic participation (Mitra, Serriere & Stoicovy, 2012). Adults' purposeful engagement with youth provide for support community development efforts (Brennan & Barnett, 2009). This case study describes a rural cradle-to-career network, a special type of area-based initiative, which provided multiple opportunities for youth input and engagement as part of a larger regional revitalization effort.

Cradle-to-career networks (C2Cs) bring together educational leaders with business, social service, and nonprofit leaders in order to create a seamless pipeline from birth through entry into the workforce. Often found in urban places, they typically focus on economic revitalization via human capital creation by increasing the number of students who are college and career ready (Lawson, 2013). In addition to this focus on human capital creation, such networks also have the potential to develop social capital and civic capacity for community development (Casto, McGrath, Sipple, & Todd, 2016; McGrath, Donovan, Schaier-Peleg, Van Buskirk, 2005; Zuckerman, 2016a). This may be particularly true when youth actively engage in network efforts.

This case study examines how adults perceive the value of youth voice and made efforts to engage youth voice in a rural C2C that prioritized youth and community development over increasing assessment scores and graduation rates (Zuckerman, 2016a). The secondary analysis presented here is part of a larger case study and was motivated by the unusual nature of this network, as evidenced in their focus on relationships, positive youth development, and youth voice (Zuckerman, 2016a). The analysis presented here was guided by the following research questions: How do rural cradle-to-career network members provide opportunities for youth voice? How might such opportunities for youth voice foster community resiliency?

Community Resiliency: Rural (Re)development and Area-Based Initiatives

Community resiliency has been defined as "the ability of local communities to adapt to, and recover from, disruptive events" (Cheshire, Esparcia, & Shucksmith, 2015, p. 9). In the face of manmade and natural disruptions, community resources and relationships provide a collective means for absorbing and coping with these shocks. In rural communities across the world, community resiliency has been identified as an important coping mechanism for the challenges faced by the economic restructuring of globalization, including the relocation of manufacturing jobs abroad, consolidation of agriculture, and limitations on extractive industries (Budge, 2006; Carr & Kerfalas, 2009; Nadel & Sagawa, 2002; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Community resiliency relies on part of social capital, including trust and shared norms, which make collective action possible (Cheshire et al., 2015; Putnam, 1993). In part, it also relies on leadership capacity and the ability to develop a collective action plan and carry it out (Cheshire et al., 2015).

Reduced government interest in supporting rural communities creates the need to rely on local resources and relationships (Cheshire et al., 2015). Decentralization may bring decision making closer to citizens, yet relies on local capacity, which may be limited in rural communities (Shortall, 2004; Tandler, 1997). Multi-sector area-based initiatives have been identified as a way to build capacity to contend with local challenges of governance and economic development (Shortall, 2004). Cradle-to-career networks are geographically bounded multi-sector partnerships; and although their development in the United States has largely occurred in urban areas (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014), they have much in common with area-based initiatives in the United Kingdom (U.K.). In the U.K., multi-sector area-based initiatives have sought to counter limited government investment in rural places by focusing on the development of human and social capital in the service of civic and economic development (Cheshire et al., 2015; Shortall, 2004; Tandler, 1997). For rural communities to create a better future for themselves, they must develop a shared vision of the future and develop reservoirs of leadership and relational skills to create a collective capacity for change (Corbett, 2016; Schafft, 2016).

In the United States, as in other nations, the work of rebuilding rural communities is challenged by the outmigration of the most well educated and socially connected youth. Encouraged by school leaders, teachers, and community members who equate success with seeking opportunity outside the local community, these young people often leave rural places to pursue economic opportunities aligned to their academic credentials. In turn, rural communities without significant cultural, civic, and leisure amenities fail to attract upwardly mobile young adults from other areas, leaving these communities with limited human and social capital (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Carr & Kerfalas, 2009; Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014).

These migration patterns create several challenges for cradle-to-career networks, and other area-based initiatives supporting the development of youth in service of rural redevelopment. Although many rural researchers are concerned with the outmigration of human capital for economic development, the limited investment in non-college bound youth, who are more likely to remain in the community as adults, (e.g. Carr & Kerfalas, 2009) may have other consequences. This lack of investment may limit the potential leadership and civic skills among adults in rural communities, which in turn may make it more difficult to develop such skills in youth. Additionally, as the most well connected youth often leave, and those that remain may experience social isolation and exclusion (Howley & Howley, 2010; Petrin et al., 2014; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Tieken, 2014), there is a need to foster all youths' social connections to adults and each other. Lastly, rural communities need to develop attachments to place that may support youths' decisions to remain in the community as they transition to adulthood (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1997). Budge (2006) described such attachments to place as "habits of place" including: "(a) connectedness, (b) development of identity and culture, (c) interdependence with the land, (d) spirituality, (e) ideology and politics, and (f) activism and civic engagement" (p.3). The first and last of these habits in particular highlights the need to bring youth into the social and civic lives of their community.

Area-based initiatives overlap to some degree with the place-based educational practices in their aims to develop human and social capital, as well as attachments to place. Place-based educational practices focus on local geography, geology, culture, and history while building connections between schools and communities (Hammer, 2001). In the U.S.,

rural education researchers have advocated for place-based educational practices to address concurrently the needs of youth and community development (Schafft, 2016). When schools engage in place-based pedagogy, they foster connections to place and community (Gallay, Marckini-Polk, Schroeder, & Flanagan, 2016), making youth less likely to relocate away from their communities (Corbett, 2016). And, engaging youth in place-based initiatives provides pathways for civic engagement, particularly when including other marginalized groups (Wheeler & Thomas, 2011).

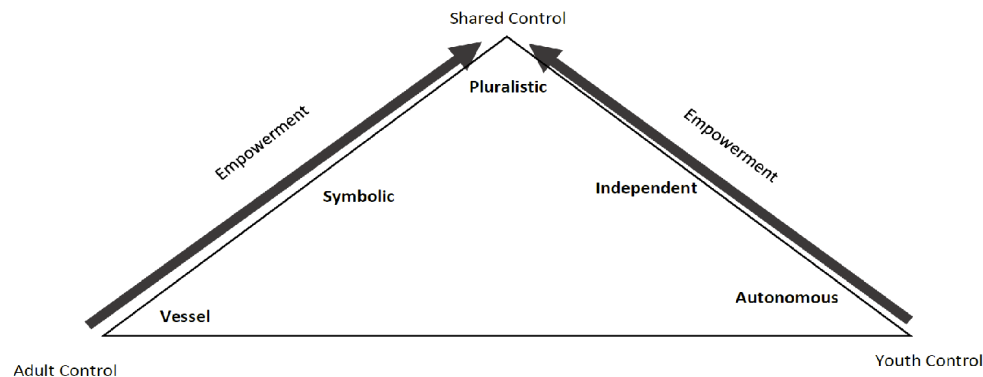
Despite the important role rural youth may play in the development and redevelopment of rural communities (Carr & Kerfalas, 2011), and place-based education as a means to address the twin challenges of youth and community development, youth are not often included in such initiatives (Shortall, 2004). This study provides insight into a unique rural cradle-to career network that engages youth as active participants in action planning.

Youth Voice and Development

Youth voice has gained increased interest as a means to create school change and to support positive youth development because it can increase young peoples' agency, sense of belonging, competency in social critique, and problem solving, facilitation, public speaking, and interpersonal skills (Mitra, 2004). Developing a sense of belonging aligns with the needs of rural communities to retain youth in the community (Howley et al., 1997), while agency, social critique, and skills related to problem solving align with the need to develop and carry out action plans for community resiliency and area-based initiatives. Taken together, youth voice opportunities that support youth development may contribute to human capital, social capital, civic leadership, and sense of attachment to place necessary for rural community development. Therefore, youth voice may be an important intergenerational opportunity for community development in rural areas. However, not all youth-centered voice efforts may contribute to community level change. For example, Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2013) identified egalitarian youth-adult partnerships as a means to create community change. In other words, community change comes from genuine youth-adult partnerships rather than just listening to youth. Due to the nature of the youth voice initiative within a multi-sector partnership for youth voice, we focus on this conception of youth-adult partnerships, as well as Wong, Zimmerman, and Parker's (2010) typology of youth participation that places shared decision making at the apex (Figure 1).

Partnerships require deliberate efforts to bring youth and adults together in shared work in a collective, yet pluralistic democratic fashion over a sustained period around social justice issues. Such partnerships have been found to strengthen an organization or address community needs (Zeldin et al., 2013). The connection of youth and civic development within such models for youth-adult partnerships suggests the importance of youth as involved and equal members in area-based initiatives in order to create a two-generation approach to community resiliency.

Fig. 1: *TYPE pyramid adapted from Wong et al. 2010.*



These conceptions of youth-adult participation and youth participation highlight the importance of both perspective sharing and subsequent collaborative problem solving. Due to their positions and skills, adults play a key role in developing the conditions that lead to productive youth voice initiatives. However, schools provide a difficult setting to engage youth voice due to the intrinsic power dynamics. To combat this power differential, intentional steps must be taken (Mitra, 2009). These include developing structures and processes, as well as creating positive relationships. Structures within schools to support youth voice include robust student governments (Brasof, 2015) and providing dedicated time through extracurricular models (Mitra, 2009).

Structures are necessary but insufficient to produce positive school change or youth development. Distributing leadership among adults and youth requires attention to process, including the behaviors of adults that may facilitate or inhibit the development of youth voice (Brasof, 2015). Adults set the stage for communities of practice by developing shared skills, shared language, and shared norms (Mitra, 2005). Teachers and school leaders may lack the attitudes, skills, and dispositions to develop youth as shared leaders, suggesting the need to train adults in facilitating youth voice (Brasof, 2015; Mitra, 2007). Structures and processes are further supported by positive, egalitarian relationship building between adults and youth (Mitra, 2009; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). Adults can promote these relationships through actions like honest dialogue, following up on commitments, and other trust building activities (Brasof, 2015; Mansfield, 2015).

Methods

The conceptual framework above suggests that egalitarian youth-adult partnerships may provide a two-generation approach to creating community resiliency in rural areas by providing youth with necessary skills for change. This study examines how youth voice opportunities operate within a larger cradle-to-career network in a rural area, guided by the following research questions: How do rural cradle-to-career network members provide

opportunities for youth voice? How might such opportunities for youth voice foster community resiliency?

To answer this question, a secondary data analysis of a case study of a rural cradle-to-career network was conducted. Data for that study was collected between November of 2014 and May of 2015 under the Institutional Review Board at the University at Albany. Case study methodology was selected for the larger project as it provided tools to map the conceptual territory of unique phenomenon and maintain focus on the meaning of rural people's lives in context (Schafft & Jackson, 2010; Yin, 2013). The following section provides an overview of the original case study and the analytical strategies used in this secondary analysis. Additional details (for example, site selection, sampling strategies, and interview protocol) can be found in previous reports (Zuckerman, 2016a; 2016b).

Overview of the Original Study

As the focus of the larger study was on rural cradle-to-career networks in the State of New York, this case study took the cradle-to-career network as its bounded system and unit of analysis (Yin, 2013). Analysis for site selection included using information from the National Center for Educational Statistics definitions (NCES, 2006) which resulted in a sample of two cradle-to-career networks, both of which were contacted in order to learn more about each of them. Based on these conversations, along with publicly available documents, the study was narrowed to Grand Isle Network, located in the upper Midwest.

Context and Case Description

Grand Isle is a large, non-metropolitan county in an upper Midwest state with a population density of approximately 20 people per square mile. Traditionally, forestry, mining, and agriculture served as the economic backbone. However, with these industries in decline and an abundance of pristine forest and lakes, the county has shifted towards a tourism dependent economy. The county seat, Big River, serves as a regional economic and leisure hub for what is widely understood as the "greater Grand Isle area." This area includes nearly 30 towns and villages organized in seven school districts and a charter school across three counties. The Big River school district serves 4,000 students, while those in outlying areas serve as few as 300. Table 1 provides details on each school and the format of their youth action planning teams.

Table 1 *Schools and Action-Planning Groups*

School	Grades	Enrollment	NCES Designation	Action Planning
Big River HS	9 th -12 th	1,500	Rural Fringe	Student Clubs
Little River Secondary ²	7 th -12 th	100	Rural Remote	None
Hawk River-Elk Falls Secondary	7 th -12 th	250	Rural Distant	None
Winslow Secondary	6 th -12 th	425	Rural Distant	Recruited
Green Lake HS	9 th -12 th	300	Rural Fringe	Recruited

Grover Charter School	6 th -12 th	100	Rural Remote	Student Council
Harwood City HS	9 th -12 th	100	Rural Remote	None
Pine Hills Secondary	7 th -12 th	130	Rural Remote	None
Timber View Secondary	7 th -12 th	150	Rural Remote	Student Council

Although Grand Isle County remains over 90% white (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), unlike much of the rest of the state, the main source of diversity is not comprised of recent immigrants and refugees, but rather Native peoples. The superintendent of the school, which serves several villages on the Reservation, reported a sense of co-existence, yet both white and Native participants reported that negative stereotypes and “historical trauma” have created a deep distrust and divide between these communities. Additionally, participants also identified low levels of educational attainment, economic decline, and rising poverty as community-wide concerns. Participants reported the community college leaders have worked to align its programs with local employers, and others noted many young people who leave for the urban state capitol eventually return to raise families. However, one participant reported that she was surprised how many youth left the state for highly selective colleges and Division I sports scholarships. When asked if these youth return, she stated flatly that they do not. Others stated the need to develop pathways for youth into the local economy and to create opportunities for all youth to choose to live in rural places.

Despite challenges identified, participants were quick to point out community strengths and spoke of their communities with great pride. One participant noted that a strength of the greater Grand Isle area is the combination of small-town values with a progressive mindset about moving forward together. Other participants described the strengths of the community as “never satisfied,” “always wanting to reach higher,” “hardworking,” “collaborative,” “giving,” “friendly,” and as “hitting above its weight” in terms of cultural amenities and other opportunities not found in similar communities in the state. One of these amenities is the Grand Isle Foundation, a private foundation started by the sale of the lumber mill in the 1940s. This foundation’s mission is to improve the well-being of rural communities in the state, particularly in the Grand Isle area. This foundation served as the backbone organization for the Network, with staff providing logistical and technical support, as well as facilitating meetings and building relationships with and between community members.

The Grand Isle Network includes members from K-12 education, early childhood, the local community college, social service agencies, non-profit organizations, government, business, and faith-based organizations. This multi-sector partnership draws on previous collaborative work in K-12, early childhood, and afterschool providers. The network originated from conversations held in late 2009 between members of a long-standing collaboration among the school districts and the local community college and a private organization, which served as the backbone organization during the network’s launch. The following year, these conversations expanded to include a series of three community-wide events in which the current state of education and the community were discussed and hopes for the future surfaced. In 2010, the Network formed with a group of approximately 50 core team members. In 2011, several members of this group traveled to Cincinnati to learn about the Strive Network. The

next year, this group developed their own roadmap of aspirations for the community, which was followed by several focus groups on what it would take to “move the needle” in these areas. Between 2014 and 2015, the first action steps were taken, including collecting and disseminating data from 7th to 12th grade students, the development of a smaller leadership team, and the creation of action planning groups.

Among cradle-to-career networks using a Strive model, the Grand Isle Network stands out due to its focus on building relationships between adults and youth, creating connections to community, and ensuring youth feel accepted in the community. While members identified educational attainment and economic development as the original impetus towards multi-sector collaboration, many participants reported a recent increase in youth suicides and attempted suicides as catalysts for action. These tragedies were described as far-reaching in their small, tight knit communities and appeared to shift the focus of the Network to include a more holistic approach to youth and community development. As such, they are related efforts to include youth voice.

Data Collection

In order to achieve triangulation, data were collected from a variety of sources during two week-long site visits. First, 49 individuals participated in 28 interviews and six focus groups. Second, several meetings were observed, including a leadership meeting, a working group meeting, and a large community-wide gathering with over 200 adults and youth, resulting in ample field notes. Third, internal artifacts and publicly available documents were collected.

In order to identify key informants and focus group participants, a publicly available list of network members was utilized. A criterion-referenced approach identified study participants who were (1) active in the network; (2) belonged to a key stakeholder group identified in the cradle-to-career network literature; and (3) provided geographic diversity across the area under study. Interviews and focus groups utilized a semi-structured interview protocol that allowed the same data to be collected across participants while providing opportunities to probe thinking and gain additional insights into network development and activities (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Field notes and interpretative memos provided the first step in analysis while in the field. This included identifying major themes and areas for follow up as they emerged (Maxwell, 2012). To facilitate analysis, transcripts, documents, and memos were uploaded to a database in NVivo 10 (QRS, International, 2012). Analysis first proceeded deductively through a list of *a priori codes* developed from an extensive literature review on cradle-to-career networks and related collective impact efforts, organizational partnerships, community organizing, and civic capacity theory. These codes were used primarily to chunk data into primary categories such as mobilization strategies and issue-framing content.

Next, inductive coding was utilized to identify concepts within each of the main areas. This was complemented by matrix displays and axial coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña,

2014). Youth voice emerged as a key theme during the inductive phase of analysis. A summary report was shared with network leaders for member checking to increase validity and reliability. In addition, peer debriefing with an expert in cradle-to-career networks was conducted to support member checking efforts (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2013).

Expanding on previous analyses, this study analyzed data using youth voice codes, along with codes relating to social capital, relationships, and action planning in order to understand the processes, structures, and relationships that supported the active engagement of youth in carrying out the Network's theory of action. Matrix displays and axial coding (Miles et al., 2014) were again used to identify salient themes.

Findings

Findings indicate that youth were provided with multiple opportunities to contribute their voice to the work of the Grand Isle Network and to serve as actors in carrying out the Network's theory of action. These opportunities included adult directed focus groups and a survey completed by over 2,000 youth in the area. They also included adult facilitated activities, including a community gathering at which the survey data was presented and school-based action planning teams. Select youth contributed to the Network's blog. For the purposes of this paper, findings are limited to the structures, processes, and relationships put in place by adults to facilitate youth voice.

While the overall work across the span of approximately a year did not rise to the level of egalitarian partnerships identified by Wong and colleagues (2010) and Zeldin and colleagues (2013), they did provide youth meaningful opportunities to identify problems using data and generate action plans with the guidance of adults. In this section, we focus on the data gathering and the youth action-planning groups because they moved beyond symbolic opportunities for youth voice (Wong et al., 2010) and provided structures, processes, and relationships for youth to authentically engage and contribute.

Data Meeting

The first structure put into place was a community-wide data meeting held in November 2014, at which baseline data from the youth voice survey was released. This youth voice survey was developed in collaboration between the Grand Isle Network and a local educational research organization. It included items aligned to community factors for positive youth development, as well as to the Network's goals. Over 2,000 7th-12th graders completed the survey in the spring of 2014. Held in the new hotel conference center, the meeting was attended by over 200 adults and youth from across the Grand Isle area.

Network members set the tone for putting youth at the center by combining inspirational speeches from Network members, performances by a youth band and a cheer group, and multiple opportunities for small groups of youths and adults to discuss the survey report. Adults also set the tone with comments from the podium, such as: "We have a lot to learn from you and our conversations will be richer because of you... Each data point is the story of one of the 3,000 young people [who took the survey]." She continued, encouraging everyone to "stay open to your young people."

The processes used included guided facilitation by trained Network members, referred to as “community connectors,” at each table. After general conversations about the data, youth and adults were invited to move to tables to further discuss specific issues, such as technology skills and access, post-secondary education and youth aspirations, and out-of-school time opportunities. The largest group by far gathered around the issue of “feeling accepted in the community,” which included the entire cheer team.

To debrief and share out from these specific conversations, individuals at each table shared a summary that connected the data to participants’ perceptions of the problems and their causes. Several youth stood to address the larger group. Youth talked about challenges to attending afterschool programs, including the obvious challenge of transportation, as well as pointed out that some schools have grade requirements so not all youth can participate. They also identified a lack of confidence in their schoolwork but also felt like they were not being challenged to grow. One young person questioned how many youth responded that they wanted to go to a four-year college and whether there were jobs in the area that aligned with those post-college ambitions. Throughout the discussions, social media posts were displayed on two large screens and Network leaders read aloud what youth posted, such as, “Kids want a place to hang out that isn’t faith-based, no disrespect,” and one that said, “Learning that adults care.” The event ended with inspirational videos and the cheer team’s performance to Taylor Swift’s *Shake It Off*.

Following the gathering, a Network member reported that the format of the small table conversations provided youth with “an equal say.” Several adults reported that the survey and subsequent data meeting served as an “eye opener,” particularly in the revelation that three-quarters of 7th-12th graders in the region “don’t believe they have meaningful opportunities to contribute, to be involved, to feel safe, and to feel connected to their community.” Many also connected this sobering realization with the spike in youth suicides and attempts in the region. Despite the potential negative energy, network members reported this event generated interest and excitement from both adults and youth. Youth reportedly took the energy of this event back to their school-communities, which supported action planning.

Action Planning

The energy created by the data gathering was harnessed to start action planning groups at the school-community level. This section describes the work of these groups that developed in five of the eight secondary schools. In some cases, these groups leveraged existing groups of youth leaders, such as the student government and a community service club, in order to form plans of action.

In other schools, however, adults actively worked to include youth who were “not necessarily the kids that were already involved in a lot.” One participant in the Winslow secondary school explained going to efforts to include “kids that might have a different perception of what it means to be connected because they’re not involved in sports and stuff.” He also stated the importance of “reach[ing] out to kids who might not be the natural ones to go into that...kids from a broad section who aren’t used to having their voice actually being heard as much.” Similarly, the Green Lake HS principal reported recruiting such students because it “show[ed] them that you may not be the person who stands up there and talks or put things forward, but you’re still a leader in *doing*.”

Like the processes used in the data gathering, trained community connectors facilitated the groups at each school. With the exception of ongoing conversations at the Grover Charter School, participants reported that action planning primarily proceeded over the course of a school day. The groups analyzed their district's survey data, identified areas of need, and developed ideas to address them. The community connectors who worked with these groups described efforts to put youth at the center. One community connector reported, "You have to let the youth drive once in a while."

Placing youth at the center of the action planning process was most evident at Grover Charter School, where a community connector reported, "We wanted to make it clear that we wanted to listen to the students." She described doing this by creating "a circle of chairs in the middle" for youth while adults sat outside "in the wings." At Big River, the director of the community service club reported he left his students to brainstorm with a community connector. He reported being "comfortable leaving" and that "it was better that way." In a blog post, a community connector at Winslow described taking a backseat to the action planning:

During the day, I watched as teens worked together to develop goals and plan for action. I watched as they encouraged each other—when one person struggled, others stepped up to help. I continuously witnessed examples of quiet support and caring for each other. It was a privilege to watch as the team took on some really hard tasks; breaking the processes down to manageable pieces. At the end of the day, I felt inspired by these teens having gotten to know a little more about their world.

Putting youth at the center reportedly required ongoing attention of the professionals. According to another community connector, it was sometimes difficult for the professionals at the table to "share that power," even though the "kids know better." Adults reported the importance of learning from youth and, for example, at Winslow, one of the facilitators reported surprise that the students interpreted school readiness not as a measure of a kindergartener's ability, but as the day-to-day struggles they have to get enough sleep, eat healthy food, and get their homework done. He said, "So for adults and for kids...being prepared for school meant two different things, but I was very pleased at the way they saw that."

While adults focused on putting youth at the center, they also reported the importance of adult facilitation. One community connector stated, "unless there is an adult group backing them it's hard to get [youth] going and initiated." Having this adult support was beneficial during action planning to help youth narrow down their brainstorming ideas to ones that could realistically be carried out. For example, at Winslow, the Boys and Girls Club director reported providing structure and facilitation that helped youth see "this is where we're at now," but also reported that youth "led it, they just followed the plan and we just kind of helped them along." He also recalled, "Once they had the idea that they wanted to work on, then we took them through that action planning process where we got them to think of like a step-by-step way to implement this plan." At Winslow Secondary, this support included helping youth develop a timeline and taking several youth to a school board meeting to present their group's idea of an open gym and game night they called Sports for all Sorts.

Although one of the adult community connectors in Winslow expressed hope that the students' plan would not be a one-time event or program, he reported he was "really happy that they did that because the kids *did* it." He continued, "The kids took a different route than what I had envisioned, which happens just about every time in my life working with kids." Community connectors put aside their preconceptions to allow youth to drive the ideas. In Winslow, these adults supported youth in presenting the ideas to the school board and working through some of the logistical challenges, such as insurance for an open gym night. At Big River and Green Lake, youth action planning also led to activities meant to bring adults into the schools to interact with students.

At Grover Charter, the community connectors reported continuing work with youth. She described setting the stage for ongoing conversations with students. Adults also identified the importance of building relationships with youth during this process. At the Grover Charter School, one of the community connectors reported:

I connected with them and they showed me their greenhouse project at the school...it was raining, but we don't care...And they were talking about the plants they had started and all this little seedlings and you know how they were going to put up these hydroponic systems and it was really a wonderful conversation.

She reported this interaction with the students "opened the door for continued contact throughout the summer and then it went into the fall. And that was really the most key." This community connector's description was among the clearest that demonstrated the recognition of the importance of building relationships between youths and adults to support youth voice, as well as the long-term goals of the Network.

Roles of Adults

The processes and structures put in place for youth voice, as well as youths' inclusion as active participants in carrying out the theory of action, resulted in part from the efforts of adult champions and shared values among network members.

These adult champions held a variety of roles in the community, but all worked with children and youth in their professional capacities. For example, a network leader and member of the Native American community who described herself as being a vocal advocate for youth, worked for child protection services. She described engaging other Network members in hard topics, such as the challenges the "have-nots" face in the community and the "daily" racism and stereotypes faced by youth in the Native community. She described herself as "very vocal," and stated, "I just speak my mind and tell it like it is... And a lot of people, I can see that they don't like to hear some of that stuff. But you know what, truth is truth. You cannot outrun truth."

She also reported advocating listening to youth, as well as advocating on behalf of youth from challenging backgrounds:

And so it's important for me to keep that in mind especially when I'm sitting on the [leadership team], paying attention to that because if you're going to be

a voice for those little kids that can't tell you, you know, anything, then it's important to pay attention to that.

Another champion was the director of the Boys and Girls Club in Winslow, who oversaw the district's afterschool and summer programs and served as a community connector in that school. He reported several times a strong desire to have youth plan these activities to increase their engagement, especially as attendance waned among older youth. In a blog post, he wrote:

In my opinion, the best way to get teens to attend out of school time programming is to ask them what they want, when they want it and let them plan it. They build valuable skills by planning and implementing their own programming, no matter the content of the programming.

He also provided an example from his previous work in Winslow, where high school students plan "Fifth Quarter" activities at the school to give youth an alternative to drinking after home sports games. He described youth playing "Zombie tag" in the hallways, campfires, and movie and video game nights. He generally gave the impression that he was amenable to whatever youth planned, so long as they were in a safe environment. He reported that engaging youth in planning these activities provided youth a learning opportunity and a way to change community perceptions about youth alcohol use, as well providing fun in a safe environment.

In his work with the action planning group at Winslow Secondary, he reported using his network of teachers and club leaders to recruit interested youth, purposefully seeking those from more challenging backgrounds. He reported the planning group included a student in the foster care system and one with discipline problems. He reported those students "struggle with maintaining connections because I just think in the past they've been let down a lot." He continued, noting how important their participation was:

But I feel like when they were part of this process, they were both super. They seemed like they were surprised that anybody would even ask for their opinion on something, you know those were my favorite two and they had a lot of the best answers, too, so that was really neat to see kids from that—I don't know, they normally wouldn't have been selected for something like that I think. And they've offered a lot of great input.

Another champion of youth voice was the principal of Green Lake HS, who described himself as a long-time "proponent of student voice." He demonstrated this through his support of a student group that developed out of a student's recognition of the need to combat bullying and give kids a voice. The principal connected this need, in part, to recent suicides by three graduates of their school, as well as three suicide attempts from current students. He highlighted this student group and their work to organize a community event, including securing a small grant for a movie and food: "Those kids that were in [that] group kind of they ran that whole night. And it was just really empowering and neat to see them do that." He also reported working to recruit students who are not the usual suspects for action planning to develop their leadership abilities

Other Network members served as champions, including one who advocated for youth representatives to the Network's leadership team and to connect existing school-based youth leadership groups to form a youth governance council. While recognizing the need to bring at-risk youth to the table, she reported, "I still feel the need to have those kids who are kind of just the natural leaders...to start the process. They need to encourage [other] kids to come to the table too."

Other champions included a leader of a faith-based youth program, who reported the importance of providing high school students with safe spaces to discuss the challenges they face as teenagers, such as: "depression and suicide or about dating and sex or about chemical use or about getting along with parents." Additionally, a recent college graduate from the area was hired to serve as a liaison with the high schools. She described her role as "working in all the districts trying to get youth to be more connected to community... I was kind of a liaison between community members and youth and trying to help build some of those bridges to connect those groups." She also talked about working as a facilitator to ensure that the youth groups "generated where they wanted to go with everything."

Shared Values

In addition to individual champions, there appeared to be shared values around including youth as actors in carrying out the theory of action. Forty-six of the 49 study participants reported a need to listen to youth in order to improve outcomes. This attitude was exemplified by a Network leader and member of the local Native American community: "In my culture where I was taught that—listen to those young—listen to the young people, especially those little bitty tiny kids because they're so new from the creator that they know things." She also expressed the need to get back to the value of relationships and working together.

Participants also reported the value in engaging youth voice in terms of developing programming for them. A community connector who participated in the student survey gathering reported:

One thing I liked about the November convening was that we had youth there and getting to listen to the youth. We always talk about, as adults, 'Well, we know how to solve this.' Well, you've gotta have the youth at the table to really understand that kind of peer point. And I was impressed by the youth that were there and their perspective on it. It made me take a step back a little bit and stop and think about, 'Oh yeah, you gotta quit trying to fix this. We gotta listen to it from their perspective first.' Help them come up with a solution, you know? Let them drive the solution.

Similarly, the director of the Winslow Boys and Girls Club reported that he was struck by one young woman's comments: "That one girl stood up and said, 'Let us plan it, let us do it, you just pay for it,' and I was like, 'Yeah, that's exactly what I want to do!'" He continued, stating professionals needed to "set aside our egos and say, 'Tell us what you want?'" Others reported that as professionals, they often think they know what kids need but realized they needed to listen to youth to improve their efforts.

In addition to valuing youth voice on its own and for programming, others identified the connection between youth development and community development. As one community member stated: “If the youth do not feel valued by the community, do you think they will want to stay here after they graduate?” In a blog post, a Network member wrote that the survey data served as a call to arms in “revitaliz[ing] the Grand Isle area’s commitment to being a vibrant, rural, community.”

Limitations

This case study examined rural cradle-to-career network that prioritized the inclusion of youth voice to understand how adults contributed to these opportunities. Before concluding, it is necessary to recognize the limits of this study. First, it is limited by the nature of its focus on a unique cradle-to-career network in which members valued and sought to engage youth voice. While the findings are not generalizable, they illuminate how rural cradle-to-career networks and other community development efforts might engage youth in identifying issues and generating solutions.

Secondly, and most importantly, this study is limited by its reliance on data collected primarily from adult network participants. Based on previous research in cradle-to-career networks, it was not anticipated youth would play any role, let alone such a large one, and therefore institutional review board procedures for conducting research with minors were not in place at the time of data collection. As a result, youth voices are largely missing from this study beyond those observed in the public meeting and those expressed in the publicly available blog posts. Third, the case study provides a snapshot of the Network’s activities over approximately one year and did not provide a longitudinal analysis of either community or youth level outcomes.

Discussion

This study examined how adults created opportunities for youth voice in a particular type of rural area-based initiative, a cradle-to-career network. Although this study was limited by a lack of data from youth themselves, it does provide insight into how adults in cradle-to-career network provided opportunities for youth voice. These efforts were supported by shared values and a belief that youth were not only objects of change efforts, but could also be active participants in carrying out the theory of action, which included a dual focus on workforce development and youths’ connections to community. Though this study did not follow youth or community outcomes, it did identify nascent efforts to include youth in meaningful ways. Previous research on area-based initiatives, community resiliency, and youth voice suggest engaging youth in cradle-to-career networks has the potential to contribute to the ability of individuals and organizations to work together for the betterment of the community (Carver, 1997; Cheshire et al., 2015; Mitra, 2004; Murray & Dunn, 1995).

Previous research has identified the important roles adults play in creating the conditions for authentic youth voice efforts that contribute to positive youth development and community change (Brasof, 2015; Zeldin et al., 2013). Here, we identified several roles that adult Network members played in supporting the inclusion of youth voice within a cradle-to-career network. First, they supported the development of the structures and processes used in

both the data gathering and the school-community action planning groups. At the school level, these structures looked different, with some adults recruiting students specifically and others tapping into existing leadership groups. In both cases, trained community connectors used facilitation processes to support youth in examining and interpreting data, as well as in developing achievable action plans. Adults benefit when students interpret the data, as it preserves youth voice and helps translate meaning between each group (Mitra, 2004). Having youth analyze data apart from adults may diffuse potential emotional situations (Biddle, 2015). In this case, adults analyzed the data previously, but then allowed youth the space to interpret it themselves. As one community connector reported, youth interpreted the data differently and surfaced their own daily concerns in the process. For youth, developing skills for data analysis can support not only their development, but also problem solving and strategic thinking that contribute to community resiliency (Cheshire et al., 2015; Murray & Dunn, 1995; Shucksmith, 2012).

Second, adults maintained a focus on process. For youth development, focusing on process is often more important than outcomes (Mitra, 2005). Adult members of the Grand Isle Network recognized this and in particular, the director of the Winslow afterschool club emphasized that the end product was not as important as youth going through the planning process and bringing activities to fruition. He and other champions displayed a degree of self-awareness of their own “adultism” or the assumption that adults know what is best for youth (Bell, 1995). They also recognized the need to step back from the “professional knows best” approach to let youth “drive.” Adults further supported the process by deliberately creating a welcoming environment, but taking the backseat in the discussions. This highlights the important roles adults play in making space for youth leaderships (Mitra, 2006). Developing intergenerational relationships can be seen as contributing to social capital, an important factor in community resiliency and area-based development efforts (Cheshire et al., 2015; Shortall, 2004).

Third, adults worked to develop relationships; in particular, they worked to create trust by keeping youth at the center. In some cases, keeping youth at the center was literal with adults placing themselves outside the group of youth. The community connector at Grover Charter School also highlighted the importance of taking genuine interest in youth and their projects as a means to develop an ongoing relationship. Developing ongoing relationships between adults and youth around shared interests and concerns may contribute to egalitarian relationships between adults and youth that support community change efforts (Mitra, 2009; Serido et al., 2011; Zeldin et al., 2013) and in turn contribute to the social capital necessary for community resiliency (Cheshire et al., 2015).

Fourth, adults served as champions of youth voice with other adults and contributed to a sense of shared values of the importance of youth in the Network’s efforts. These adults valued the input of youth, as well as recognizing opportunities for youth to engage in genuine action planning cultivated important skills. These adults viewed youth as assets for community engagement. Previous research on rural communities suggests that when adults view youth as civic assets and provide them with opportunities for genuine engagement with adults, young people develop a deeper sense of community and commitment to place (Gallay et al., 2016). In turn, such civic opportunities and commitment to community and place contribute to community resiliency by keeping human and social capital in the community (Carr & Kerfalas, 2010; Cheshire et al., 2015).

Lastly, like other rural youth voice initiatives discussed in the literature review, an intermediary organization played an important role in providing support for youth voice. The Grand Isle Foundation serves as the Network's backbone organization and its staff organized the data gathering, as well as facilitating the development of the Network's goals and contributing to the espoused theory of action among members (Zuckerman, 2016a). Additionally, the Foundation provided training to the community connectors who worked directly with the student groups.

Together, the efforts on the part of adults can be seen as working towards the apex of Wong and colleagues' (2010) model of shared decision making that empowers both adults and youth. Previous research suggests that youth-driven participation, such as the anti-bullying group at Green Lake High School, creates the greatest positive youth development and empowerment (Wong et al., 2010). Yet, youth cannot take on this responsibility for themselves or their communities on their own, nor are they likely to have the skills to carry out such efforts independently (Wong et al., 2010). A key example from this study was adults serving as an intermediary with the Winslow school board and providing transportation for youth to propose their Sports for all Sorts night. In addition to providing logistical support and social capital, previous research suggests that adults play important roles in supporting youth voice efforts by creating space, providing scaffolding and coaching (Mitra, 2005).

Conclusion and Implications

Together, the findings of this study suggest that there is a place for youth in rural cradle-to-career networks and that their inclusion may support not only youth development goals, but also community development goals and contribute to community resiliency. While the efforts to include youth voice in the Network did not reach the apex of Wong and colleagues' (2010) model of shared decision making, or Zeldin and colleagues' (2013) definition of youth-adult partnerships, adults actively sought out youth as active players in carrying out the Network's theory of action. Their inclusion as active members required adults to create spaces for them to actively engage and provide support for youth.

The study followed the beginning, planning stages of youth voice and action planning over approximately one year. While the findings show youth engaged in action planning facilitated by adults in various districts, the short timeframe suggests that these efforts take significant time to develop true youth-adult partnerships and shared decision making (Wong et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013). Due to this limitation, additional research is needed on the inclusion of youth in cradle-to-career networks, or other area-based initiatives, to validate the conceptual framework linking youth voice, youth development, and community resiliency in rural areas.

Previous research suggests two practical implications of this study for rural community leaders. First, that while bottoms-up initiatives tend to increase authentic engagement from youth, there is a need to provide institutional support (Mitra, Serriere & Kirschner, 2014). Within school settings, Mitra and colleagues (2014) identified the need for a strong vision that incorporates youth voice and the need to create a culture that supports these practices as "the way we do business here." Such support appeared necessary from both Network members, as well as champions and teachers and leaders at individual schools. Additionally, the Grand Isle

Foundation provided training and staff to assist effort, further supporting the importance of intermediary organizations identified by Biddle (2015).

In addition to identifying an intermediary organization and collaborating with schools, area-based initiatives seeking to include youth should collaborate with organizations that already engage youth voice. In rural communities, 4-H has a long history of actively promoting youth voice and youth-adult partnerships in their work, and this decentralized, community-focused organization can fill this role (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). Ensuring the right partners are at the table is an important factor in collaboration (Lawson, 2004). Therefore, adults must consider how youth voice will be integrated when developing their theory of action, selecting organizational partners, creating network structures, establishing processes, and developing relationships.

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